

After the Battle of Poul an Tarie [Part II]

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1. Glen Udalain

In part 1 we looked at the southern farming district of Balmacara and the arrival of the MacAras who would play an important part in the turbulent times of Matheson South in the 15th and 16th centuries. Now we turn our attention to the neighbouring district due east of Balmacara, namely Glen Udalain.

Then, this was the most important locality in southern Lochalsh and so a suitable place for the HQ of the clan chief. Glen Udalain was and still is the main route linking Kintail, across Loch Long in the southeast, with Lochcarron, the district which lies to the north around Loch Carron. By the 18th century, Highland cows would be driven this way to join the assembly point at the head of Loch Carron for large herds of cattle from all across the northwest¹. From there the “drove” would head across country to the great northern “tryst” (i.e. market) at Muir of Ord in Easter Ross some 15 miles northwest of Inverness.

The district of Glen Udalain runs from Kirkton on the coast of Loch Alsh in the south, past the village of Auchtertyre and then on due north up the hill to the saddle of land at the top. The height of this pass through which the modern road, A890, now wends its way is around 530 feet (160 m). The land up here was an important settlement area in prehistoric times as shown by archaeological remnants of several roundhouses and an interesting “tumulus” or cairn. This latter monument may be the site of a possible “henge”, a sacred space with circular banks and internal ditches. Today there is a reservoir covering some of the plateau, part of the Nostie Hydroelectric Scheme dating to the late 1940’s. It was one of the first in a major post-war campaign which brought hydroelectric power to the Highlands. The River Udalain (Gaelic: *Allt Gleann Udalain*) which was dammed here turns sharply south at this point to tumble downhill into Loch Alsh. This abrupt change of direction accounts for its name of Udalain, Gaelic for swivel.

Glen Udalain adjoins the neighbouring township area of Strath Ascaig (Gaelic: *Strath Ascaig*) which lies in northern Lochalsh. Most of this latter region, in Iain Dubh’s time in the last quarter of the 16th century, belonged to the warlike MacDonalds of Lochalsh, allies of the MacLeods of Lewis and therefore hostile to him and his followers in the south of the peninsula. For this reason it is unlikely that he would have selected northern Glen Udalain as a secure base for his clan.

So if the northern bounds of Glen Udalain were unsuitable could Kirkton of Lochalsh be the returning chief’s preferred location, the place where the MacLeod usurper had set up home?

2. Kirkton

Kirkton, or to give the village its full name, Kirkton of Lochalsh (which distinguishes it from the many other Kirktons across Scotland), means – village with the kirk (i.e. church). Of key significance in Lochalsh in earlier times when the village contained, for centuries, the only Christian place of worship in the district, it has now declined in status to a small hamlet on the main road from Dornie to Kyle and the Skye Bridge. And this fact was confirmed when the Church of Scotland deconsecrated the kirk in 2015 so bringing to an end more than a thousand years of Christian worship here.

It was way back in the 8th century that the Irish missionary, St. Comgan, founded the first Christian chapel in this vicinity when the church and settlement would have been known as Kilchoan (Gaelic: *Cill Chomhghain*,

Comgan's Church). History has little to say about the kirk here in succeeding centuries until the third decade of the 16th century, when *Blar na Saighde*, the Battle of the Arrow (see Part 1), took place. This was when one Duncan Matheson burnt down the church in order to smoke out MacLeod raiders who had taken refuge inside. Ever afterwards he was known as *Donnchadh an Teampuill* (Church Duncan) for his sacrilegious act.

Presumably the church was repaired afterwards but, a century later, a Presbyterian delegation reported that the building was in a dilapidated and roofless condition. This report led to a new kirk in 1641 but, as time passed, it became too small for the growing congregation in the late 18th century and so no longer fit for purpose. It was demolished in 1801 leaving Lochalsh without a Presbyterian church. Pressure had to be brought to bear on the Lochalsh landowner at this time, Sir Hugh Innes, to remedy this unsatisfactory state of affairs. With considerable reluctance, apparently, he eventually put his hand in his pocket and erected the present plain box in 1807 that we can still see today.

Associated with the former church is a large cemetery behind it where many Lochalsh Mathesons lie today. By far the oldest memorial is the carved stone effigy which lies face up and exposed to the elements (see also Part 1). This is John Matheson, Constable of Eilean Donan at the time of the castle's siege in 1539 by MacDonald of Sleat and his allies from the Isles. The carved monument is likely to have been commissioned by MacKenzie of Kintail in recognition of Matheson's part in the successful defence of this powerful chief's castle which led to the constable's death in action. Indeed there is a similar style of effigy carved into stone in MacKenzie country in the east of Ross-shire which is still in a reasonable state of preservation in the ruins of Beaulieu Priory, sheltered in an alcove and also lying face up.

This latter monument is a memorial to Kenneth MacKenzie² who won a great victory for his clan at the Battle of Park in 1491 (near Strathpeffer in Easter Ross) over invading Islanders led by Alexander MacDonald of Lochalsh. Sadly John Matheson's effigy was not to remain protected and under cover as the centuries passed and the church faced difficult and changing times, as we have seen. Today it lies in the open, badly eroded by long exposure to the weather and attack by lichen.

However while Kirkton was an important centre in Iain Dubh's time there were good reasons why the returning chief decided not to settle here despite its local significance. One of the main disadvantages is amply illustrated by the attack by hostile MacLeods and the resulting Battle of the Arrow. Kirkton is simply too near the coast and so was wide open to attack by sea raiders from Loch Alsh in the 15th century.

Hence both northern and southern Glen Udalain were insecure locations for the home of the chief and his followers at a time when he was surrounded by hostile MacDonalds and MacLeods. He needed a site nearer the centre of Glen Udalain and so we now turn our attention to the other village in this district, Auchtertyre.

3. Auchtertyre

Auchtertyre is another small Lochalsh village through which modern traffic speeds on route to Skye. Situated at the bottom of the slope it lies next to the junction between two main roads, the A890 coming south across the peninsula from Loch Carron and Achnasheen further northeast, and the A87 running east to west through Lochalsh. The latter one connects this part of Wester Ross with the Great Glen at Invergarry to the southeast.

It is instructive to examine the village's name³ in more detail. Auchtertyre, a version of which first appears in written record at the end of the 15th century (and so in the time of Iain Dubh), is the "Englished" version of the original Gaelic word, *Uachdar Thire*. This translates as Upper Part of the Land suggesting that the original settlement must have been located on the slopes above the modern village.

And indeed today's Ordnance Survey (OS) maps show two interesting archaeological features of ancient remains in the landscape above modern Auchtertyre on the shelf of more level land, where the ascending

road northwards (A807) turns sharply right (east) before resuming its direction up the hill through Glen Udalain.

The first of these are the remains of structures, identified as “hut circles” on the map, which lie above this west – east section of the road beneath the slopes of Maol Beag (Little Bare Hilltop). The other site^{4,5}, lying at the eastern end of the row of hut circles, is marked as a “Dun”. This was once a thick walled enclosure, interpreted by archaeologists as a defensive farmstead. It was originally built at the top of a small rock outcrop but there is little to see today apart from tumbled large stones on its slopes which no doubt once formed part of the house’s walls. This Glen Udalain Dun is not far up the hill, on the right-hand side of the road, from the modern viewpoint and parking area, from which there is a splendid panorama extending from the mountains of Kintail to the south-east, through Loch Alsh and its coastline below, and south-westwards to Kirkton and its environs.

4. Conclusion

My conclusion is that it is this ancient settlement with its main farmstead at the eastern end was the original site of Auchtertyre before it moved down to its present position. And this is the most likely location of the base selected by Iain Dubh, the returning clan chief. At one and the same time it was close to an important route junction in Loch Alsh in the late 15th and succeeding 16th century and was also ideally placed for Matheson South to detect early the approach of hostile sea-raiders from Loch Alsh in very dangerous times for the clan.

Having identified the main locations in southern Lochalsh of the Matheson chief and his clan following the disaster of Poul an Tarie, in Part 3 we will look at how things panned out for Iain Dubh and his successors in the south during turbulent times in the 16th century. This was a period known in the Highlands as *Linn nan Creach*, the Age of Raids, and it would see major clashes between Island and mainland clans as they fought for control of the Northwest. And Lochalsh would be at the centre of some of the worst violence.

5. References

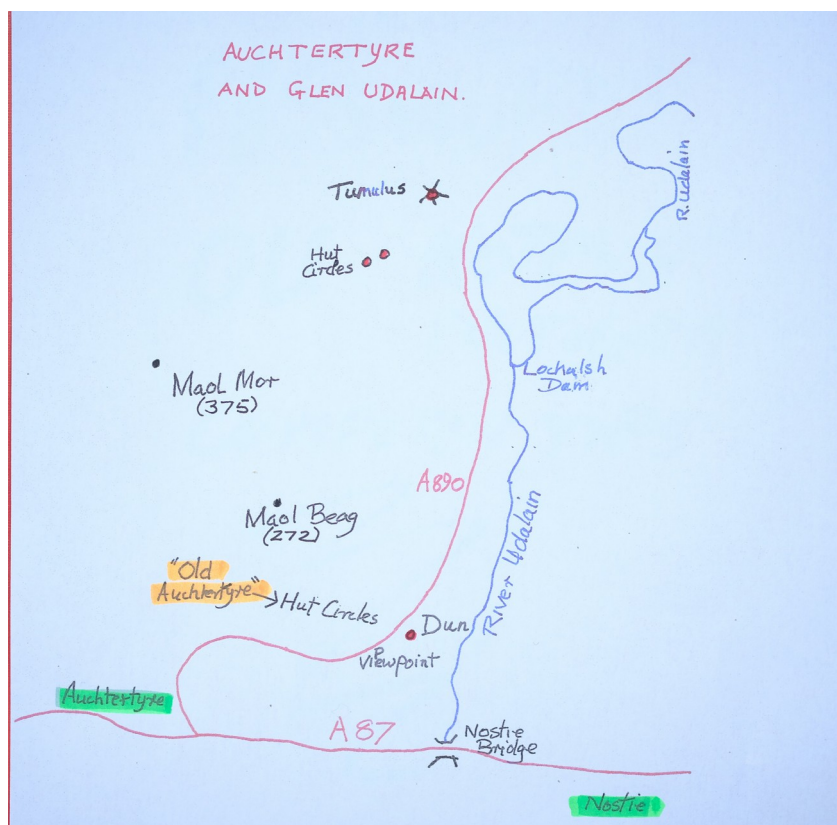
1. A.R.B. Haldane, “The Drove Roads of Scotland”, 1952, Thomas Nelson and Sons, page 109.
2. Moncreiffe of That Ilk, “The Highland Clans”, 1982, 2nd Edition, Barrie and Jenkins, photograph on page 147.
3. William J. Ross, “Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty”, 1904, Nabu Public Domain Reprint, page 186.
4. T.Wallace, 1898, Gleann Udalain Dun Archaeology Notes (online), (available from – <http://canmore.org.uk/event/659021>)
5. L. Hamilton, 2014, Dun Gleann Udalain (online)

6. Illustrations

1. Places of Matheson interest in Glen Udalain marked on OS one inch to the mile map (see Part 1 for map information)



2. Diagram showing features of archaeological interest in Auchtertyre and Glen Udalain.



3. Upper Glen Udalain district with the River Udalain flowing towards the Reservoir from the northeast with Meall Ailein (Gaelic: Round Hill in the Meadow) in the background.



4. Kirkton Bay, an inviting target for sea-raiders from Loch Alsh in the times of Matheson South. The playing field is used today for the popular Highland sport of shinty.



5. The Church of Scotland's former building in Kirkton of Lochalsh. This picture was taken pre-2015 when it was still in use for services.



6. Black and White image of John Matheson's effigy in the churchyard at Kirkton. Note his two-handed sword, a Highland claymore (Gaelic: *claidheamh mor*), lying on his chest. This was the badge of his office of Constable of Eilean Donan Castle.



7. This picture was taken from the small burial ground on *Cnoc nan Aingeal*, Angel's knoll, at Kirkton (the most easterly and highest knoll). The view looks northeast towards the distant slopes above Auchtertyre. On the upper side of the road (A890) there are remains of "hut circles", the likely site of "Old Auchtertyre" in the late 15th and succeeding 16th centuries.



8. Outlook from the viewpoint above Auchtertyre over Loch Alsh and Kirkton Bay which would have given early warning of any hostile attacks on the coast of southern Lochalsh to Iain Dubh Matheson and his family. Across the loch is the Isle of Skye.

